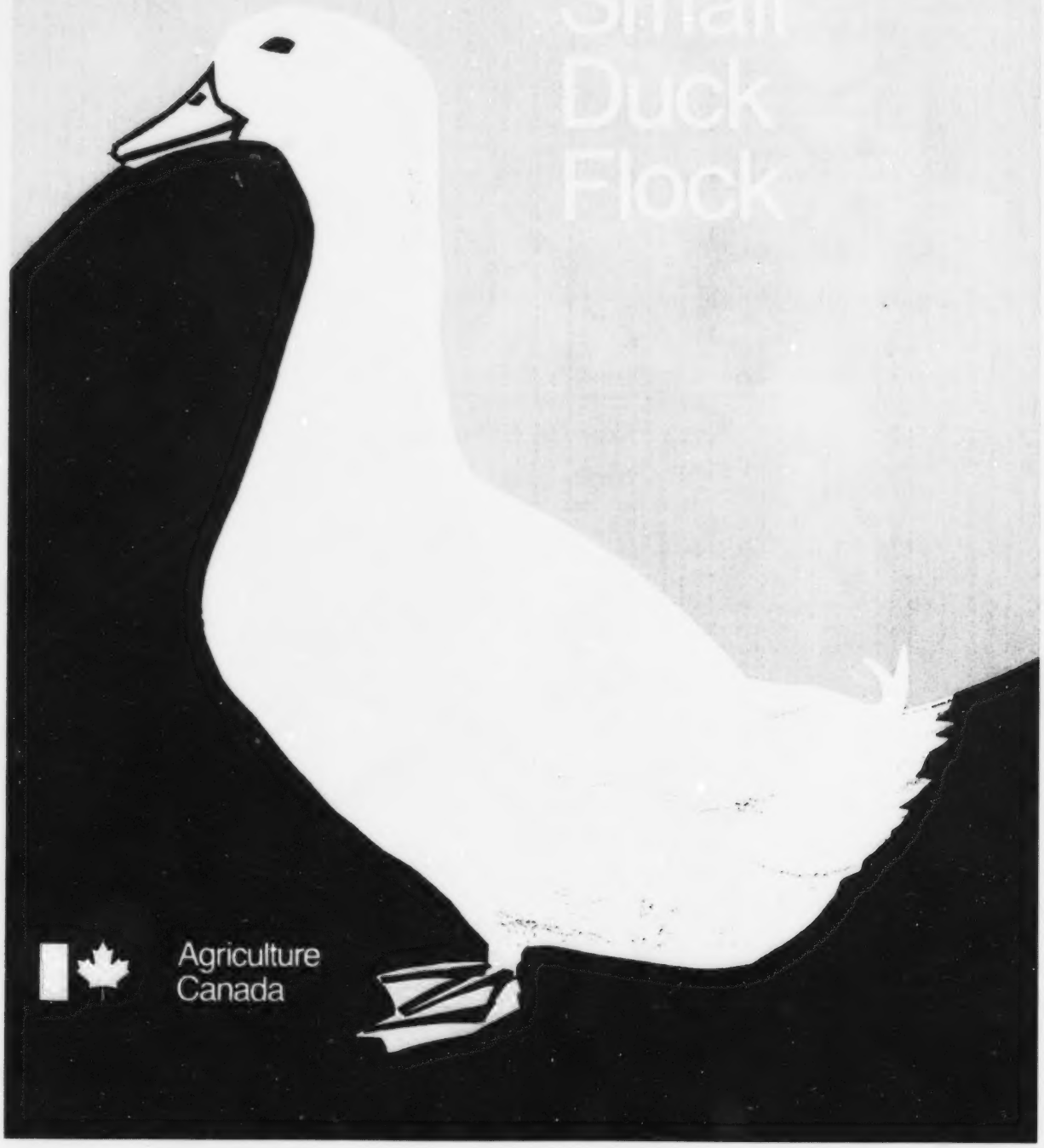
PUBLICATION 1524
REVISED 1977

Managing a Small Duck Flock



Agriculture Canada

Copies of this publication may be obtained from
INFORMATION DIVISION
CANADA DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
OTTAWA
K1A 0C7

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Printed 1974
Reprinted 1974
Revised 1977

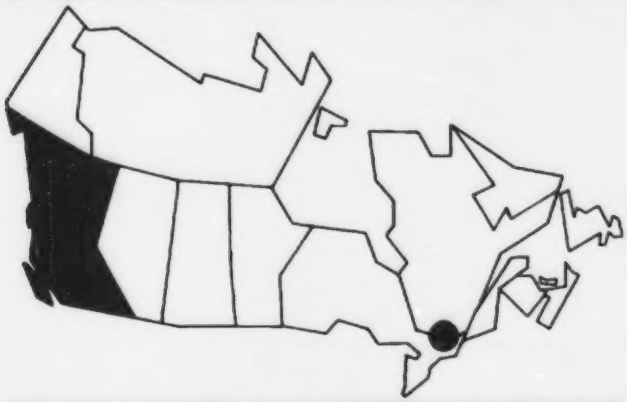
10M-38836-10:77

Cat. No.: A63-1524/1977
ISBN 0-662-01145-7

Kromar Printing Ltd.
Contract No.: 11KT. 01A08-7-38836

101-00587/

A FEDERAL/PROVINCIAL PUBLICATION



CANADA/BRITISH COLUMBIA

MANAGING A SMALL DUCK FLOCK

This publication was originally produced by the British Columbia Department of Agriculture Poultry Branch. Under the provisions of the Federal-Provincial Regional Coordinating Committee on Agricultural Publications, the Canada Department of Agriculture has agreed to print this publication.

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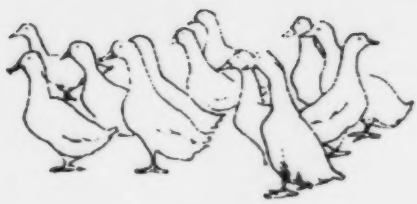
Managing a Small Duck Flock



This publication is presented as a guide for the hobbyist or backyard farmer on the management of small duck flocks; it is not intended as a guide for a large-scale commercial operation.

If you are thinking of raising ducks commercially, bear in mind that the market is usually limited to large cities and the demand is not as broad as that for chicken. Ducks are most popular with people of Far Eastern or European backgrounds. Before going into production, make sure a market is available and then seek sound advice on the development of a duck enterprise.

BREED SELECTION

Ducks are primarily kept for meat because of their rapid growth, hardiness and ease of handling. Rapid growth combined with good egg production make the *Pekin* the most popular breed of duck for meat. Other good meat strains are the *Aylesbury* and the *Muscovy*. The breeds for egg production include the *Indian Runner* and the *Khaki-Compbell*. These ducks will lay as well as a good strain of White Leghorn. Besides the meat and egg producers, there are a number of ornamental breeds that also make good eating.

SELECTION AND CARE OF BREEDERS

The selection of vigorous breeding stock is essential. Breeders are selected from the earliest hatches of the year, with the initial selection

being made when the birds are about 8 weeks old. A final selection is made before they are placed in the breeder pens. Breeders should be uniform in size and at the approximate weight range for the breed used, having a full breast, deep keel, long back with good width between the legs. In making the selection, it is a good idea to walk the birds for several hundred yards (metres). Eliminate those that have difficulty walking at a reasonable speed.

Breeder ducks are most profitable during their first laying year. However, they can be used successfully for 4 or 5 years. In backyard flocks it would be more desirable to keep ducks for several years.

Five to eight ducks can be mated to each drake. In colder weather, limit the number of ducks per drake to five. In warmer weather increase it to eight.

Drakes may be determined by their larger size, higher-pitched voices and more erect carriage than ducks. Ducks have a distinct "quack"; drakes do not "quack".

In handling ducks, pick them up by the neck rather than by the legs, which are easily broken.

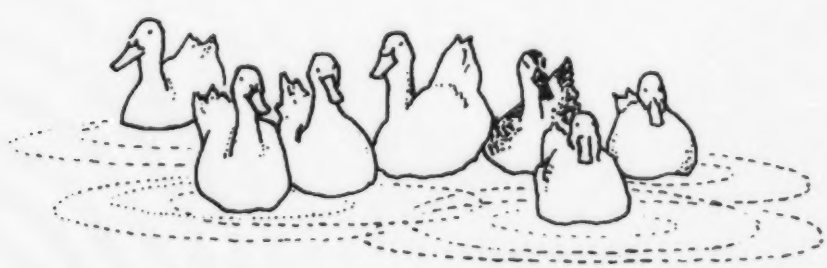
Breeder ducks require very little equipment for their care. For farm flocks, a shed or colony brooder house is satisfactory. Provide 0.46 m^2 (5 sq ft) of floor space per bird in the house.

Dirt floors may be used in buildings if the soil is light and sandy, but concrete floors are recommended as they are easily cleaned and more sanitary.

Since ducks lay most of their eggs in the morning, confine them in the breeder house until noon, so that all eggs will be laid in the house. Provide nest boxes and place them on the floor where the ducks have easy access to them. Provide one nest box for every five ducks.

Any feed or water equipment that is satisfactory for chickens can be used for ducks. Water troughs should be designed to keep birds out. Otherwise, the water will become filthy and a potential health hazard.

Breeding ducks should not be too fat when they commence to lay. Overweight can be avoided by maintaining ducks selected for breeders on a holding ration. Approximately 1 month before the ducks start to lay, give them a breeding ration which is pelleted and fed free choice.



INCUBATION

Duck eggs may be incubated naturally or artificially. Chickens and some duck breeds are quite adequate for hatching duck eggs. Do not use Pekins, Khaki–Campbells or Indian Runners for hatching. They are difficult to make broody. If chickens are used for hatching water fowl, the eggs must be sprinkled daily with lukewarm water. With the exception of those of the Muscovy strain, duck eggs require 28 days to hatch. Muscovy eggs require 35 days.

Collect eggs several times daily. Wash soiled eggs in water having a temperature of 43–46°C to which a sanitizing agent has been added. Store eggs in a cool, moist place at a temperature of 10–15°C and a relative humidity of 70%.

Always follow the manufacturer's recommendations when using incubators. In still air machines, the following temperatures are recommended: 38.3°C for the first week; 38.9°C until the 25th day, and 39.4°C from the 25th day until the hatch is completed. Never let the temperature rise above 39.4°C.

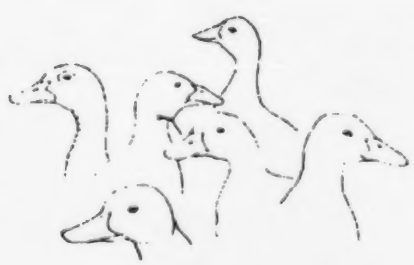
Turn the eggs frequently (at least four times daily) to increase hatchability.

Moisture in still air machines is provided by placing a full pan of water below the egg tray. After the first week sprinkle the eggs once a day with lukewarm water.

Provide a small-to-moderate supply of fresh air up to the 24th day; after that, larger amounts are desirable as long as humidity is maintained.

In forced air incubators, the following temperatures are required: 37.5°C with a wet bulb reading of 32.2°C for the first 3 days; 37.2°C with a wet bulb reading of 29.4°C up to the 25th day; 36.9°C with a wet bulb reading of 32.2–33.3°C from the 25th to 28th day. During hatching, open the vents to allow more ventilation but make sure that humidity is maintained.

Candle the eggs on the 10th and 24th days. Remove all eggs that are infertile or contain a dead embryo. These eggs decompose rapidly and may contaminate the incubator.



BROODING

Ducklings can be brooded with ducks, hens or artificially. If hens are used, they must be confined and the ducklings given free range as the hens are likely to tire the ducklings by wandering too far.

With artificial brooders, any type of equipment that is suitable for chickens is satisfactory for ducklings. Ducks are moved to the brooder house about 24 hours after the hatch is completed. It is best to put 100 to 150 ducklings under each brooder. Maintain the temperature under the brooder at 29.4-32.2°C for the first week, 23.9-26.7°C for the second week, 21.1°-23.9°C for the third week and thereafter at not more than 21.1°C. The length of time that heat is needed depends on the season of the year and the weather conditions.

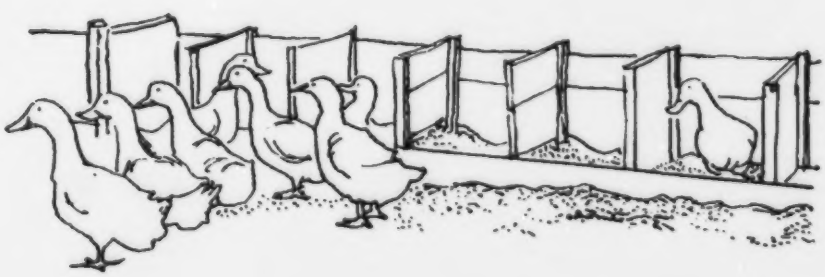
Keep the ducklings close to the hover with a brooder guard during the first 3 or 4 days until they learn where to get warm. Provide 7-10 cm (3-4 in.) of good litter in the pen. Litter must be maintained in a clean, dry condition at all times.

If the weather is good, ducklings can run outdoors after 1 week of age. In cold, wet weather, keep them indoors until they are 2 or 3 weeks old. Ducklings need shade in very warm weather and protection in cold, wet weather. Good ventilation and sanitation are necessary at all times. As a rule, do not allow ducklings to swim until they are 5 to 6 weeks old.

FEEDING

Feed ducklings as soon as they are placed in the brooder house. Use a good duck ration if possible but if one is not available, use a chicken broiler starter. The birds can be switched to a diet containing about 18% protein at 2 weeks of age and to a 16% protein diet at 5 weeks. The breeder diet should contain about 16% protein and 2% calcium. Feed should be pelleted as mash has a tendency to stick in the ducklings' bills and may cause them to choke.

Any type of feeder that is suitable for chickens may be used for ducklings. A large cookie pan makes an excellent feeder for the first 2



weeks, thereafter feed troughs or hanging feeders can be used.

Water may be supplied in fountains or by various automatic waterers. Arrange the waterers so that the ducklings can submerge their bills in the water but cannot get into it to wet their bodies. This permits them to drink and to clear their nostrils by squirting water through them.

Supply grit free choice to the ducklings at intervals of 1 or 2 months.

Lights are needed so the ducklings may eat and drink at night. Lighting also helps to prevent the ducklings from becoming frightened - an important consideration in view of the highly nervous nature of the young birds.

MARKETING

Most ducks are marketed at 7 to 8 weeks of age. Pekin ducks of a good strain will weigh 2.5-2.9 kg ($5^1/_2$-$6^1/_2$ lb) and be relatively free of pinfeathers at this age.

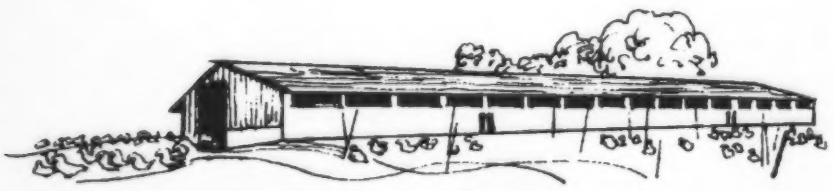
Ducks are killed in the same manner as chickens: the bird is hung by the legs, the throat is slit and it is allowed to bleed thoroughly.

The feathers can be removed dry or by scalding, which simplifies their removal. To scald, dunk the ducks in water maintained at a temperature of 60°C. Use a large tub to facilitate the dousing and make sure that the water penetrates through the feathers. Adding a detergent facilitates water penetration. Remove the feathers as quickly as possible, but be careful not to tear the skin. Then cool the carcass rapidly to maintain satisfactory appearance and to prevent spoilage of the meat.

DUCK TROUBLES CAUSED BY MANAGEMENT

The condition known as "staggers" is commonly caused by a temporary shortage of drinking water. If the birds feed before the water is replenished, death usually follows in a short time.

Cold water can be fatal to overheated ducklings. Therefore, leave water for ducklings in a warm place until the chill has gone before pouring it into their drinking vessels.



Ducklings cannot tolerate the sun after eating. If natural shade is not available, provide some type of shelter.

Feather eating or quill pulling is a habit which frequently gives trouble in larger flocks. It is usually caused by crowding too many ducks into too small an area. The remedy for this problem is to debeak the ducks in much the same manner as chickens. To debeak the ducks, you need to remove the horn at the front of the top bill. The same remedy is required if cannibalism occurs in laying flocks.

Ducks are highly nervous. If chased vigorously, they will go lame. Do not allow animals, especially dogs, to chase them. If this should happen, remove the lame ducks from the flock. They will regain the use of their legs in a week or two.

As a rule, ducks are more vigorous and are less subject to disease than hens. If disease occurs, it is most likely to be the result of unsanitary surroundings and faulty management or inherent weakness due to breeding.

For further information, contact the poultry branch of your provincial department of agriculture.

SPACE REQUIREMENTS

Age in weeks	Area per duckling		Feed space		Water space	
	cm^2	(sq ft)	cm	(in.)	mm	(in.)
1 to 2	900	(1)	2.5	(1)	12	($^1/_2$)
2 to 3	1350	($1^1/_2$)	2.5	(1)	12	($^1/_2$)
3 to 4	1800	(2)	3.7	($1^1/_2$)	25	(1)
4 to 5	2250	($2^1/_2$)	5.0	(2)	25	(1)
5 to 8	2700	(3)	5.0	(2)	25	(1)
8 or more	4500	(5)	7.5	(3)	37	($1^1/_2$)